

are all witnessing on television and in the newspapers certainly bring back the dreadful memories of Katrina. These storms that have ravaged our country are natural disasters. Certainly our prayers and our hopes are with the people of the Galveston area and others who have been afflicted by the terrible flooding in the Midwest. We are concerned about them, and we will do everything we can to help them put their lives back in order.

The devastation we have witnessed is heart-rending, and I think it is incumbent upon us to respond generously and speedily to help the tens of thousands along the Texas coast who need our help.

I rise also to discuss the humanitarian catastrophes inflicted against the people of the Caribbean. I chair the subcommittee on foreign relations that deals with Latin America, and I am particularly interested, obviously, in what happens in this part of the world. I served as a Peace Corps volunteer not far from the Haitian border of the Dominican Republic when I left college in 1966. I served for 2 years in that country, and I have gone back many times over the years and have maintained a close relationship. So when I see these storms ravaging the island of Hispaniola, which includes the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and roar through the island of Cuba—it has done such devastation; I am told it is the worst storm to inflict such damage on that country in more than a half of century—I wish to take a moment to talk about what we might do.

I support an amendment offered by Senator LUGAR, the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and which we have introduced on a bipartisan basis. We hope this might be something that all of our colleagues would support as well. It is to respond to the devastation these storms have caused on the island of Cuba to the Cuban people.

Across the Caribbean, millions of people have been displaced, lost their homes, and watched helplessly as bridges and infrastructure were washed out, leaving them isolated and without supplies. They face serious shortages of food, medicine, and hope.

The need in Haiti is extremely grave. USAID has undertaken an urgent program in Haiti, where hundreds of storm victims have died, thousands of homes have been destroyed, and untold people have been weakened by chronic malnutrition, lack of food and water. USAID has already launched a \$20 million program to rush assistance to the suffering people of Haiti, and further needs are certain to be identified there in our hemisphere's poorest country where the average income is something like a few dollars a week. It is a nation that has been devastated over the last number of years.

In Jamaica, 72 communities have been hit hard, leaving a dozen people dead and thousands without shelter. The U.S. Ambassador in Kingston has

declared a disaster and has begun disbursing \$100,000 there. USAID is working with the Jamaican disaster specialists to purchase and deliver hundreds of thousands of dollars of supplies to communities cut off when roads were washed out. The relief supplies include hygiene kits, plastic sheeting, jerry cans, and blankets.

This very effective response brings relief to innocent victims of the storms and it projects the American message of concern and hope for our Caribbean neighbors. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for our response to the crisis caused by the hurricanes that have battered the lives of the 11 million people on the island of Cuba. Evacuations of 2 million citizens helped reduce the loss of life, but the damage is immense. Hurricanes Gustav and Ike destroyed 150,000 homes and seriously damaged 200,000 others. The United Nations estimates that Cuba suffered between \$3 billion and \$4 billion in losses. Hundreds of thousands of victims are without shelter, fresh water, and electricity, damage to agriculture is massive, food and medicine are in short supply, and the need for materials to repair homes vastly overtakes supply.

The State Department offered to disburse \$100,000 in emergency funds through the U.S. Interests Section—our Embassy in Havana—which is a step in the right direction, and I applaud them making that offer. In addition, over the weekend the State Department offered an emergency shipment of \$5 million of assistance to Cuba. Cuban officials—in what I think is a very shortsighted move, in my opinion—rejected the offer, saying they would not accept a handout from a country that would not sell the same items to them.

The administration has also authorized certain U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations, with activities the administration has previously approved, to provide larger amounts of humanitarian assistance in Cuba, including cash donations to approved recipients for 90 days. These Government-approved channels for assistance to Government-approved recipients are again steps in the right direction, but given the devastation that has occurred, it is not hardly enough. They disallow, moreover, the outpouring of assistance from Americans individually who want to help directly and generously, as Americans do in times such as these, not just through administration-approved channels.

Large numbers of the Cuban-American community in our country, eager to help family members back on the island of Cuba, are blocked from doing so by tough regulations that the administration implemented in 2004 in an effort to promote the collapse of the Cuban regime. These regulations dramatically and drastically impair citizens of our country—who come ethnically from the island of Cuba and who have family members there—of the ability to visit their families during

this time, even under extraordinary circumstances such as the death of a loved one. The regulations drastically impair their ability to send cash assistance to families in the same manner as all other Caribbean, Central American, and Mexican families do—families who have citizens in this country and have families in Jamaica and Haiti, the Dominican Republic—to go there and provide assistance to them.

It is no secret that the U.S. embargo on Cuba has been, at least in my view, a dismal failure. Rather than weaken the Cuban Government and force it to change, it has only served to weaken the Cuban people and deprive them of any hope at all. The administration's tougher regulations circumscribing Americans' right to help family and friends in dire need in Cuba are part of the same failed policy. Apparently, some in the Bush administration believe that holding firm on embargo policy—even during a humanitarian disaster—will discredit Fidel or Raul Castro and lead to their precipitous downfall. When human suffering is as massive as we see in Cuba today after these hurricanes, there is no room, in my view, for such cynicism.

Despite the obvious need for a total overhaul of policy toward Cuba, the amendment Senator LUGAR and I have introduced today addresses only the immediate humanitarian crisis and only on a temporary basis. For a period of 180 days, our amendment would lift prohibitions on Americans with families in Cuba to travel to the island to provide help during the crisis. Secondly, only for 180 days, our proposal would ease restrictions on the cash remittances by any American to Cuban people at this time of extreme need—only for 180 days. Thirdly, our proposal would expand the definition of gift parcels that Americans are authorized to send to the Cuban people or nongovernmental organizations over the next 180 days to include food, medication, clothing, hygiene items, and other daily necessities. Fourth, the bill would allow the cash sale using mechanisms similar to those already in place for the sale of agricultural products, of certain items Cubans need to rebuild their homes, again for a limited period of 180 days.

Let me be absolutely clear. These measures do not lift the embargo at all. They have nothing to do with the embargo *per se* but merely loosen some of these less humane regulations implemented in 2004 in a direct response to a humanitarian crisis. Cuban Americans in this country ought to be allowed to help their family members on the island of Cuba during this time—for 180 days—to be able to send food and clothing and medicines, some cash remittances, or to travel there to help out, and they should not be banned by the United States of America.

Let me promise you something: Hugo Chavez will be filling that gap. Why are we going to allow, in this hemisphere, someone in Venezuela whom we abhor